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Did Moscow try to kill Pope John Paul II?

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All the data are not yet in, but the evidence linking the Soviet apparat to last year's attempted murder of the pope is now extensive.

The would-be assassin, Mehmet Ali Agca, originally was thought to be a "right-wing" fanatic. As the story has been unraveled by intelligence specialists and the Italian security police, the opposite appears to be the case: Agca was functioning as a pawn of the Bulgarian Communists — who in turn are faithful stooges of the Kremlin.

Among other peculiar items about Agca, investigators turned up the fact that he had gone to Bulgaria in 1980 after escaping from a Turkish prison and stayed there for approximately two months. For a "right-wing" fanatic to hole up in Bulgaria, a hard-line Communist dictatorship, seemed a little strange. "For a right-wing extremist to go to Bulgaria is suicide," says one Turkish student of the case.

As developed by authors Claire Sterling and Brian Freemantle, reporters for *The American Sentinel*, and witnesses before the Helsinki Commission, other facts on Agca were equally suggestive: Somebody supplied him \$50,000 over a period of a year and a half, he had extensive help in setting up shop in Rome and he had two accomplices on the scene of the attempted murder.

Pursuing such leads, Italian authorities have arrested Sergei Antonov, Rome-based deputy director of the Bulgarian state airline. The Italians have charged him with complicity in Agca's

murder plot. Two other Bulgarian officials are also said to have been involved, along with Turkish go-betweens. The resulting picture is one of mind-boggling international intrigue, meant to climax in one of the most audacious crimes in history.

The implications are even more mind-boggling when we reflect that Bulgarian assassination squads hardly would contemplate such a momentous deed without direction from the Kremlin. The Bulgarian intelligence service is a loyal tool of the Soviet KGB. "Every department of the Bulgarian state security service," says one Bulgarian emigre, "is directly supervised by a KGB officer on the spot."

In other words, according to the data now assembled, the plot to assassinate the pope must have been approved, if not in fact concocted, by the Soviets. Why Moscow would undertake such an act, considering the risks it entailed, is a topic of much speculation. One theory is that the pope's strong sympathy for Solidarity in Poland was the decisive factor, and that the Soviets thought, by using Agca, that they could pin the blame on "rightists."

All of which is stunning in itself, but even more so in what it suggests beyond the unsuccessful effort on the pope. In recent decades there have been a number of brutal assassinations of major political figures — including Pres-

ident John F. Kennedy and his brother, Sen. Robert Kennedy. In these two cases and many others, political-ideological motives have been excluded from consideration. Every such murder, we are informed, is the work of a "lone assassin," functioning without discernible help or purpose.

Such explanations always seemed odd in view of the known connections and beliefs of some of the assassins. Lee Harvey Oswald, who shot President Kennedy, was a militant pro-Communist who had defected to the Soviet Union, married the niece of a KGB official, had numerous contacts with Marxists in this country, and shortly before the assassination had traveled to Mexico where he visited the Soviet and Cuban consulates.

Despite all this, the possibility that Oswald had been prompted or encouraged by Moscow, Havana or other Communist power centers was not considered. In the immediate aftermath of the JFK assassination, word came down from on high to avoid "the Communist angle" because of possible global complications. The many leads that tied Oswald to the Communists were systematically ignored or downplayed by the official investigators.

The clinching argument for this ostrich-like approach has always been that neither the Soviets nor the Cubans would do anything so zany as trying to assassinate a U.S. President. Even the Communists, we have been told, are not so irrational as that. Now, in view of the evidence about the attempt against the pope, you have to wonder.

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